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Guests Who Came to Dinner & Who Didn't

Puns, Pundits and The President's Man

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The "Honorable Joseph Powell," as the president's press secretary was introduced at the White House Correspondents' Association dinner on Saturday, tried to offer an olive branch. Two years ago at the same podium, Powell sharply criticized the press and left them seething. This year he stuck mostly to jokes and left the audience of 1,800 merely amused.

For the second time in three years of the Carter administration, Powell served as stand-in for the president. In journalists' circles, an Oval Office absence is considered a serious breach because the dinner is in honor of the president. Despite some pressuring, President Carter spent the weekend at Camp David.

"I walked into the Oval Office," said Powell. "I didn't pussyfoot around, I didn't mince words, I looked at the leader of the Free World straight in those steely blue eyes and I said, Rosalynn, make Jimmy do it." Laughter.

Powell then went on to describe the importance of Carter's weekend meeting with his foreign policy advisers, secretary of state-designate Edmund Muskie and national security affairs adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski. More laughter — because Brzezinski, with his three security guards, was very much in evidence. In fact, he stood up and waved when Powell mentioned his name. Powell paused, saying, "Zbig, they told me you were invited [to Camp David]."

On Saturday night the broadcast journalists were feeling slightly heady. One of their own, Walter Cronkite, had been the center of vice-presidential speculation last week, and another CBS personality, Robert Pierpoint, had become the first president of the association from electronic media in 66 years.

"This should start a trend," said Pierpoint about Cronkite. "George Bush and Tom Snyder? Ronald

Reagan and Rona Barrett? Teddy Kennedy and July Woodruff?

"I don't want to alarm Walter Mondale." But Jody said Mondale doesn't have to worry. Geraldo Rivera was not talking to Carter, about Mondale's job.

Though the leading Democratic and Republican presidential hopefuls failed to show, independent John Anderson and Ed Clark, the choice of the Libertarian Party, were visible. Before the dinner, Pierpoint posed for photographs with the two candidates; as the photographer raised his camera, Anderson put down his glass, explaining, "They'll never believe it's Coca-Cola."

The week's news, primarily the appointment of Muskie as secretary of state and the stories about Cronkite, led the dinner chit-chat and jokes.

Referring to Muskie's legendary temper, Pierpoint said, "Like one of his colleagues said, 'Putting Ed Muskie in charge of diplomacy is like putting Henry VIII in charge of a course on monogamy.'"

In the audience, Elliot Richardson, ambassador at large, commented, "It's a fine appointment. But I was genuinely disappointed to see Secretary Vance go."

U.N. Ambassador Donald McHenry offered, "I was surprised. But he's an excellent man. He has the stature,

he's a hard worker and a man of proven capability."

In a lighthearted vein, the dinner was described as an indicator of job stability in the Cabinet. A few weeks after last year's dinner, the Cabinet reshuffle took place. "Yes, Brock Adams and Joe Califano were here. Hope those present make it back," said outgoing association president Ralph Harris, of Reuter. On Saturday night, Education Secretary Shirley Hufstodler, Treasury Secretary G. William Miller and Labor Secretary Ray Marshall were all at the head table.

Though his criticism of the press was mild, Powell didn't avoid the issue. For openers he raised two fingers and said, "Everyone who can count my fingers can stay." And he said, "I was quite surprised over the flap about reporters working for the CIA. Frankly a connection between the press and intelligence had never occurred to me."

Yet he ended solemnly, quoting from Thoreau: "It takes two to speak the truth, one to speak, the other to hear."

President Carter's nonappearance drew some rebukes. Ralph Harris said he thought the president stayed away because "he was afraid I would introduce him as the 39th Governor General of the Colonies." Speaking directly to Powell, Pierpoint reminded, "no one has ever been reelected president without coming to the White House correspondents' dinner."